

The Fourth Church Pulpit

VISION OR NIGHTMARE?

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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“...on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst... one like the Son of Man...”
And he said, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,”...
-Revelation 1:12, 17 (NRSV)

This was going to be a sermon on vocation. Planned for the Sunday this congregation ordains and installs its officers for the coming year the sermon was going to emphasize the significance and, in the long history of the Christian Church, the uniqueness of choosing and ordaining lay people to positions of authority in the governance of an institution which has mostly been governed by its professional clergy. And it was going to move from that to the radical Protestant principle that each of us has a vocation, a calling; that God equips us for work and service, not simply in the church, but in the world. The sermon was going to say that all work in the world becomes Holy Work to the extent that we use our gifts and abilities and work in ways consistent with the love and justice of God's Kingdom.

But as I put my mind to preparing that sermon a sequence of events was occurring in the news and in my personal experience which kept changing the agenda, and so after the printing deadline, I changed both text and topic.

The title of this sermon is “Vision or Nightmare?” and the text is from the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation, which has been very much in the news in connection with events in Waco, Texas. It seemed to me remiss on this day not to try at least to address that. And so, the lesson from the 1st chapter of the Book of Revelation, verses 9-19:

“I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, ‘Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.’

“Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands, I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.’”

This is the sequence of events that changed the agenda.

On Monday, April 19, armoured vehicles pumped tear gas into the heavily fortified compound of a cult in Waco, Texas called the Branch Davidians, led by a Rock and Roll musician, Vernon Howell, or David Koresh as he called himself. The compound was consumed by flames and many people died — 72 is the most recent count — including at least 17 children. Much of what Koresh said before the tragedy, in the weeks after a disastrous first assault on the compound on February 28, by a team of agents from the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, had to do with the Book of Revelation. The final holocaust seemed to be a modern expression of some scenario out of the last book of the Bible. That connection was the heart of the *Time Magazine* article which quoted Revelation on the cover and used quotations throughout the article.

By coincidence, on Thursday of that same week, April 22, I found myself in, of all places, a cave on the island of Patmos in the Aegean, where tradition says St. John wrote the Book of Revelation. I had resolved, by the way, not to mention our trip to Greece, as in "the last time I was in Corinth," for at least two weeks. In any event, apart from David Koresh, Patmos was an incredible experience. The day was perfect — the brightest sun and the bluest sky I've ever seen. For 32 of us from Fourth Church it was the last stop on a busy and wonderful Greek adventure which had included trips to Corinth and Delphi, Good Friday and Easter in Athens, and by boat, Mykonos, Crete, Santorini, Rhodes, and earlier that day, Ephesus. Our guide was a wonderful Greek woman, a knowledgeable student of the Bible and straightforward Greek Orthodox Christian. As we approached Patmos by boat, she began to be more urgent than usual. She insisted that our group be first off the boat and on to a waiting bus, hurrying us past all the other tourists, up the steep mountain to the tiny church on the spot of the cave. As a result we had ten quiet minutes in what soon became another busy, crowded tourist attraction. Something came over her. We sat on benches — she stood and pointed to the spot where John, the beloved disciple, then an old man, was chained to the rock wall. We looked at the opening in the rock through which all he could see was that brilliant blue sky and with only a bit of imagination, we could see him there, old, hungry, losing his sight and hearing, chained to the inside of a cave, no contact with the outside world, alone with his thoughts and dreams and visions. Myrto said, her voice deeply emotional: "Whatever you think about the Book of Revelation, something remarkable happened in this place."

Back in Chicago 48 hours later, the May 3 issue of *Time* arrived with Koresh's face, engulfed in flames and a quotation from the sixth chapter of the Book of Revelation:

"His name was Death, and Hell followed after Him." [Revelation 6:8]

So, I did something I have not done since I had to do it for a course in New Testament: I read straight through the Book of Revelation, this book which obsessed David Koresh.

It is a strange book. It begins with stern but gracious words of encouragement and admonition to seven churches in Asia Minor, all clustered around the Turkish Coast, not far from Patmos. It contains an incredible description of violence, with images of beasts and dragons and seven-headed monsters and cosmic battles and lakes of fire. And it contains a description of God's ultimate sovereignty and victory in human history. And throughout it alternates loveliness with terror.

"Worthy is the lamb."

"And he shall reign for ever and ever."

Words which George Frederick Handel set to glorious music in the *Messiah*, are from Revelation, as are these precious words:

"Behold I stand at the door and knock." "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last."

"God will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more."

But there are also vivid characterizations of suffering and death, of beasts and conquering armies and locusts the size of horses with lions teeth and scales of iron, and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse popularized by the members of the backfield of the 1924 Notre Dame Football Team!

Author John Hersey, who died a few weeks ago, contributed an essay on the Book of Revelation to a collection of *Contemporary Writers on the New Testament (Incarnation, Alfred Corn)*. Hersey, son of missionaries, didn't have time for the Book of Revelation, thought it seems to be the product of someone suffering a bad trip on a hallucinogen, or a scriptwriter for a teenage horror movie; spoke for many of us, I suspect, saying that he had pretty much ignored it. He's not alone in that. When John Calvin wrote a commentary on every book in the New Testament, he simply ignored the last book, The Revelation of St. John. Martin Luther thought it should be dropped and identified the real problem: "everyone thinks of the book whatever his spirit suggests."

What to make of it? Vision or nightmare?

As is frequently the case, the history of the book is a key to its content. Tradition has it that John, the beloved disciple, living in Ephesus in his old age, wrote the book around 92 A.D.

What we do know is that it was a time of persecution for the Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The Emperor was Domitian.

He was, the historians tell us, devious, cruel, and probably mad. He thought he was a god. Several of his predecessors encouraged veneration of the emperor, bowing in his presence or in front of his statue, for instance. Domitian, on the other hand, insisted on it and required public sacrifices to himself. He ordered his household staff to address him "Our Lord and God."

Domitian was particularly irritated by members of what he presumed was a Jewish cult organized around a carpenter from Galilee called Jesus. So he issued an imperial order. All known Christians were to be identified and given a choice: they could worship him as their god or they could choose whatever punishment suited the magistrate's fancy: prison, torture or death.

The period of persecution in the last decade of the first century was particularly terrible. It's difficult to talk meaningfully about things like this. The Holocaust Museum which opened in Washington last week is an effort to keep alive the memory of an evil so gross our minds and spirits simply don't want to deal with it. And so, we slip the word "persecution" into innocuous sentences without dealing with the unspeakable reality the word represents: men and women and children torn from their homes and killed in the street or thrown to wild beasts or burned alive for their belief. Many, of course, denied their faith, and who could criticize them? Many worshipped the emperor with their fingers crossed.

Persecution, of course, never worked. Rome never succeeded in eliminating the Christians. Part of the reason may be that Roman soldiers had other things to do besides looking for and killing Christians. But part of the reason is also surely that there is something about persecution that brings out the best in some people: bravery, strength, self-sacrifice.

And we do know that one of the reasons so many Christians in the last decade of the first century were brave and strong was a curious letter, or small book, that they secretly circulated from city to city, church to church. . . . It was written by an old Christian who himself, it was said, had been one of the twelve disciples as a young man. It was said that he, old John, was the beloved disciple. A few years earlier, as the persecution was just heating up, he was sent into exile, to the lonely island of Patmos. And there in his exile he wrote to the Christians in Asia Minor who he knew were in for a very bad time. Using a kind of code which the Christians all understood but thoroughly baffled the Romans, he said some very unflattering things about the empire and poked fun at the emperor, a little like Gary Trudeau in *Doonsbury*. In the 17th chapter there is a wonderful cartoon character: the great - pardon the expression — "Whore of Babylon" who, because clearly she represents Rome, must have set the Christians to snickering, maybe even guffawing.

Old John predicted that some terrible things would happen, which they did, but, at the end, he assured those vulnerable, frightened believers, that God would be with them: that no matter how terrible things were at the moment, the conclusion to the story of their lives, and the life of the world for that matter, is in God's loving hands. Nothing, not even the death of all their friends and loved ones, not even their own death, would separate them from God's love nor change the way the story concludes.

John also told them to keep an eye on the future. Something was ending and something was beginning. He was right about that. The world didn't end, but before very long that age did. Domitian was assassinated by one of his servants and the next five emperors were friendly to the Christians, and by the time Rome got around to persecuting again, there were far too many of them, and before long the empire became the Christian Church's protector.

It's a tragedy that this remarkable book is so misunderstood, not simply by the David Koreshes but by everyone who tries to superimpose it on current history. It has happened in every age, as Martin Luther observed. My grandmother was absolutely certain that the beast was Adolf Hitler — although later she thought it might have been Franklin D. Roosevelt: she was sure that the Whore of Babylon was the Catholic Church and the lake of fire was the nuclear holocaust in 1952 that she was certain was about to destroy us all. Anybody with a little imagination and an ax to grind can do it. Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth* is the most popular and profitable of a whole genre of simplistic interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

Pat Robertson, whose Christian Coalition is making a very impressive effort to take over the Republican Party, published a book last year, *The New World Order*, which argued that the Gulf War and President Bush's cooperation with the U.N. was the first step in establishing the order of the Anti-Christ. Gary Wills at Northwestern University, read Robertson's book and observed Robertson's speech at the Republican convention last summer and wrote, "The crazies are in charge. The fringe has taken over." [*New York Times*, 8/16/92]

In a *Chicago Tribune* editorial yesterday, A. S. Ross lamented the silence of mainstream religious leaders in the whole "rising tide of religious extremists, including the bombing of the World Trade Center by Muslim fundamentalists, and the murder of a physician in Pensacola, Florida by a Christian fundamentalist. Let it be said from this pulpit and the pulpits of the land that what David Koresh did with the Book of Revelation, and what all the others do who superimpose its imaginative images on a particular time and set of circumstances . . . let it be said that this is not right, not Christian, not responsible, not honest.

Let it be said that to use religion in this manner, to exploit this precious ancient letter for sick and demonic ends is the worst blasphemy.

When the only religion that makes it onto the cover of *Time* is craziness, let it be said here: What David Koresh was about was not Christian, had nothing to do with Jesus Christ, was connected to no accountable Christian Church. What David Koresh was about was the pathological exploitation of lonely, needy, weak people, willing to suspend every critical faculty — in order to belong to a group, in order to be and to mean something.

Let it be said that not only is that not religion — but the Gospel, the Gospel of love and compassion and respect is, perhaps, its best antidote and preventative.

A society which values individual freedom will always be vulnerable to the exploitation of its own liberties. Which is to say that there will always be cults like the Branch Davidians who shut themselves off from the world and who prey on the weak and needy. And there will always be people like David Koresh whose own pathology, combined with the trappings of religion, will find protection under the Bill of Rights.

But I think we do have to ask law enforcement agencies to understand the violent and tragic potential of religious fanaticism. I think we do have to ask again why it is necessary to guarantee the right of people like that to purchase and own lethal weapons. In fact, the Branch Davidians might have been just another pathetic cult if it were not for the fact that in the past year-and-a-half Koresh spent \$200,000 on weapons which, according to *Time*, included 123 military style M-16 rifles and the parts to turn semi-automatic rifles into machine guns, AK-47s, 50 caliber sharpshooting rifles, M-60 machine guns, and two cases of Pineapple type hand grenades, delivered to the door by United Parcel.

One might ask about the sanity of a society that enables that and powerful political lobbies, such as the N.R.A., which spend millions of dollars to oppose passage of laws that would restrict and ban the ownership of weapons like that by Koresh or anyone else for that matter.

John Hersey didn't like the Book of Revelation because he said it predicts that bad things will happen; and then if the faithful do nothing but be patient, God will intervene and make everything come out right.

When the imperial power of Rome is arrayed against you perhaps waiting with courageous patience is the only advice that makes sense. What that misses, of course, is when Christians wait patiently, they begin to dream about a new world; not merely dropped into history by God out of the blue, but built, labored over, constructed — brick by brick, ordinance by ordinance, law by law, institution by institution, school by school, hospital by hospital - by faithful followers of Jesus.

That is what we have been up to for 2,000 years. Not waiting patiently for the end of this world, but praying for and working for a new world. We do it because we have hope: because we know and believe and trust that old John in his cave on the island of Patmos was speaking truth when he wrote his vision of a God who dwells with us.

Things may not look good at the moment. John Hersey observed that at the end of the 20th century we have to cope with plagues not ever dreamed of in the 1st century: over-population, mass starvation, mountains of garbage, epidemics of drugs, AIDS, crime. The world may appear to be an uncompromisingly frightful place and the future may not look easy and bright. That may be true for you and me personally. The future may be full of private terrors — personal disruption, loss of employment, loss of relationships, loss of meaning, sickness, surgery, death. But we know, and when we forget we hear — like a trumpet — the promise that God is with us, that death has been defeated, that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and that, therefore, we have every reason for joy and freedom and confidence and hope.

If I had preached the intended sermon on Christian vocation, I would have concluded by challenging each of us to be and do everything God has equipped and called us to be and do: to live lives of service and love and compassion, not simply on Sunday, but in the world, in our professions, our daily work, our relationships, our use of our resources, our commitments and hopes and passions.

That seems a fitting way to conclude this sermon as well. The call of Jesus Christ is not to retreat to a compound and wait for the end, literally or figuratively; it is to live fully and hopefully and joyfully, in the present, knowing that whatever the future brings, God will be there:

"See," old John wrote about his Lord and his God:

"I am coming soon: . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Thanks be to God. Amen.